



# MOHAMMEDAN BULGARIANS

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# THE MOHAMMEDAN BULGARIANS ALL THE WORLD OVER

Mohammedan Bulgarians, that is Bulgarians who have converted to Islam but speak the Bulgarian language, have not been the object of study in modern Bulgarian historiography. The center of interest has been concentrated on elucidating the reasons for their conversion and the reasons for their return to the Christian religion. Most studies discuss the question of whether violence has been used in connection with this act, or it was economic factors and the loss of privileges that newly converted Muslims in the Ottoman Empire received thus becoming equal in status with the Muslim population.

Another group of studies by Bulgarian authors concentrate on their speech, their traditions and rich folklore. A third group of scientific publications discuss the common origin and traditions of Mohammedans and their Christian Bulgarian neighbors.

## MOHAMMEDAN BULGARIANS

For the same reasons, concerning traditional folk culture, Mohammedan Bulgarians cannot be united into one single ethnographic group. In terms of dialect and ethnography they belong to different regional and ethnographic groups of the local Christian Bulgarians. This should emphasize the argument of some newly hatched theories that try to put into use the term "Pomak ethnic". Even more, Mohammedan Bulgarians cannot be identified even as a separate ethnographic group since in various parts of Bulgarian ethnography they possess the characteristics of the local Christian Bulgarians.



**BULGARIAN  
DIPLOMATIC  
REVIEW**

from the Middle Rhodopes







## THE MOHAMMEDAN BULGARIANS TILL THE LIBERATION OF BULGARIA

Mohammedan Bulgarians, that is – Bulgarians who practice Islam but speak the Bulgarian language, have often been the object of study in modern Bulgarian and Balkan historiography. The center of interest of such studies usually concentrates on elucidating the period when they were converted and the reasons for which they gave up their Christian religion. Most studies discuss in detail the question of whether violence has been used and whether coercion was the only reason why their predecessors performed this act, or it was economic factors and the attractiveness of privileges that newly converted Muslims in the Ottoman Empire received thus becoming equal in status with the rest of the Muslim population.

Another group of studies by Bulgarian and foreign scholars concentrate on their speech, their ancient rituals and the rich folklore. A third group of scientific and popular publications discuss the common origin and traditions of Bulgarian Mohammedans and their Christian Bulgarian neighbors.



Here we have a different task – to demonstrate in a chronological order the numerous data about Mohammedan Bulgarians by European authors and observers, written down and documented in the period till the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman oppression, i.e. before the appearance of modern Bulgarian education, Bulgarian administration and state institutions.

Absolutely all foreign scholars of the period till 1878 call the language used by this Muslim population Bulgarian. Rarely they use the term Slavic. They insist that Mohammedan Bulgarians are former Christians, which could be established by their customs preserving many pre-Muslim elements, by their family names, by the toponymy and hydronymy of their settlements abounding in Slavic names and Christian terminology and names of Christian saints.

The speech of the Mohammedan Bulgarians, as contemporary dialect studies show, has preserved to a great extent many grammatical and phonetic features of the Old Bulgarian language. The dialect of the Rhodope Mohammedan Bulgarians, for example, is closest to the Old Bulgarian language used in the service books by the creators of the Slavic alphabet Saints Cyril and Methodius.

The Mohammedan Bulgarians of various parts of the Bulgarian ethnic territory speak the local dialect of the Christian Bulgarians. Thus, in terms of dialect, Mohammedan Bulgarians of different geographic regions belong to the dialects of Bulgarian. Those of the Rhodope region, for example, belong to the group of Rupe dialects, the speech of the Lovech and Teteven Mohammedans, respectively, belongs to the Lovech and Teteven dialects. The Marvatzi, the Torbeshi and the Miyatzi speak West Bulgarian dialects. So we cannot speak of a common “Pomak dialect” and less so of some “Pomak language”, as stated unconvincingly in some recent publications.

For the same reasons, concerning traditional folk culture, Mohammedan Bulgarians cannot be united into one single ethnographic group. In terms of dialect and ethnography they belong to different regional and ethnographic groups of the local Christian Bulgarians. This shakes even more the arguments of some newly hatched theories that try to put into use the term “Pomak ethnos”. Even more, Mohammedan Bulgarians cannot be identified even as a separate ethnographic group since in various parts of Bulgarian ethnic territory they possess the characteristics

*Maidenly costume from the Middle Rhodopes*





*The water-mill in the locality of Hubcha, 1943*

of the Bulgarian ethnographic groups of the respective region, be it the Rupe region in the Rhodope Mountains, the Zagore region or some other. Their commonality rests on two major factors: the Muslim religion and their Bulgarian mother tongue.

The Islamic religion has introduced into their folklore and calendar some specific motifs related to Islam. But generally speaking it has not obliterated the basic characteristics of their popular philosophy of life, the Bulgarian customs and rituals and the purity of their Bulgarian language. Similar phenomena can be also observed in the communities of Bulgarian Catholics and the Evangelist Bulgarians (Protestants) and they do not create the smallest ground for "ethnic" determination and isolation from the rest of the Bulgarians. The new elements in the way of life and customs of Mohammedan Bulgarians introduced by the new religion do not break but only enrich the diversity of Bulgarian folk culture in which one can find traces of cultures older than Christianity.

Till the Russian-Turkish War of 1877–1878 the Mohammedan Bulgarians inhabit several regions of Bulgarian ethnic territory within the borders of the Ottoman Empire at that time:

- To the north of the Balkans (the regions of Lovech, Pleven, Teteven, Byala Slatina, Vratza, Turnovo, Oryahovo and parts of the Rousse region);

- In the Rhodope Mountain and the Aegean sea (the regions of Assenovgrad, Dospat, Devin, Peshtera, Pazardzik, Smolyan, Madan, Rudozem, Plovdiv, Gumurdzina and Xanti);

- In Macedonia (the regions of Nevrokop, Drama, Thessalonica, Mogilyan, Veles, Avren Hissar, Ressen, Ohrida, Kichevo, Bitolya, Prilep, Debar, Kostur, Tetovo, Kochan, Strumitza, Voden and Skopie);

- In Albania (the regions of Reka and Golo Burdo).

Bulgarian historical and ethnographic publications of the second half of the 19th c. use the term Mohammedan





Bulgarians for this population. We use the same term in this paper. This term, as we shall see from the earliest written documents, was used as a name for them also in European historical and geographic literature in the whole of the 19th c. and it has acquired currency. The newly introduced name Muslim Bulgarians, probably correct from a dogmatic religious point of view, is not the most appropriate because it mixes them with the rest of the Muslims in Bulgaria. What is more, some of the descendents of those Mohammedan Bulgarians declare themselves Christian today.

The current term Mohammedan Bulgarians bears enough information about the religious affiliation of those Bulgarians since in Bulgarian and the major European languages the term "Mohammedan" was in the past equal to "Muslim". We find it more appropriate when we are writing on a historical problem of a time when it was popular. It is more suitable in preserving the individual characteristics of this Bulgarian population and in the same time in distinguishing it from the rest of the Muslims in Bulgaria. They differ from the latter not in their denomination but in their language, folklore and traditions.

Many Bulgarian and foreign scholars in the past use the cover term "Pomaks" for this population. It was the self-appellation of only a small part of them living in some regions of North Bulgaria. In the Southern and Western parts of the country there existed other popular names of this population practicing the Islam – "Ahryani", "Torbeshi", "Marvatzi", etc.

In recent years some authors, more often in politically biased media and in the press than in historical literature, bring to life again the old name "Pomaks", which has its place in Bulgarian historiography and ethnological literature. But it sounds archaic, it is imprecise when applied to all Mohammedan Bulgarians and is out of place used in civil debates in contemporary Bulgarian society.

## EARLY WRITTEN EVIDENCE

The Secretary of the British mission in Istanbul Urghart undertakes in 1831 a long journey in the inner parts of European Turkey to study opportunities for trade in these parts. He publishes the observations from this journey in a special study in which he also mentions the existence of Bulgarians practicing Islam. He also adds that "the Mohammedan Bulgarians live in mountainous and secluded parts and those who preserve their old religion (i.e. Christian Bulgarians) live in the plains of Macedonia, Epirus, Bulgaria and Thrace". The Islamic Bulgarian population is also mentioned by the Frenchman Amie Boue who opposes the idea spread in Europe to expel all Muslims to Asia Minor in order to create an European Turkey as an "exclusively Christian empire". He defines this idea as an anti-humane decision, which cannot be completed because in "European

Turkey the Muslims", as Amie Boue puts it, "are almost always Slavs or Albanians who belong to these parts from the remotest past like their compatriots the Christians".

The Russian archimandrite Antoniy mentions in his travel notes of 1840, bearing the title *A Travel round Rumeli*, that among the Muslim population of the town of Bitolya there were many Slavs whom he estimates at 6000 people. As different from him, the monk Parteniy, speaking of the Muslim population in the Rhodope Mountain a few years later, uses their national name Bulgarians and not the general "Slavs". At that time in Bulgarian historical literature appears information about the Mohammedan Bulgarians, which is in accord with the importance attributed by Bulgarian figures of the National Revival to this problem as an inseparable part





A detail from the Architectural and Ethnographic Complex Mogilitza

of the Bulgarian national question. In 1841 the Bulgarian educationist Vassil Aprilov publishes in Odessa his *Morning Star of Modern Bulgarian Education*. In it he dwells particularly on Mohammedan Bulgarians and offers statistical data about their numbers, the places where they live and the reasons for which they have adopted Islam: "In the Plovdiv eparchy, in Rumelia and partly in Macedonia in the villages there are Bulgarians who practice the Mohammedan faith. Their number, of both sexes, is about 50 000. They have their mechiti, they observe the laws of the Koran in all details. In the family and in communicating with other Bulgarians they

use the Bulgarian language..."

As a reason for turning Muslim, as Aprilov mentions in this paper, they gave the avidity of Greek clergy: "For their conversion to Islam they blame the metropolitans and archbishops who, in order to secure in Istanbul their eparchies with large subsidy, brought with them crowds of covetous persons and attacked like predatory animals their flock trying in all possible ways to deprive them of their last penny... To alleviate their plight, many villages adopted the Mohammedan faith".

The Greek metropolitans, surprised and scared by such a development, according to Aprilov, softened their





*Maidenly costume from the Middle Rhodopes*

actions being afraid that many more Bulgarians may follow their compatriots.

In the time when Vassil Aprilov collects data about the life and way of living of the converted Bulgarians, the great Czech Slavist P. Shafarik publishes in 1842 in Prague his work *Slavic popular history*, in which there is also mention of the Mohammedan Bulgarians. In this remarkable work appear for the first time statistical data for the distribution of the Slavs in Europe. Part of these data he publishes also in the Russian journal *Muscovite*. According to Shafarik's statistics in the 1830s the Orthodox Bulgarians within the borders of the Ottoman

Empire amounted to 3 287 000, the Catholic Bulgarians were 50 000, and the Mohammedan Bulgarians were 250 000. A few years later Shafarik publishes his work *Slavs in Antiquity* in several volumes. A considerable part of the second volume is dedicated to the Bulgarian Slavs. The Bulgarian ethnic territory, according to him, includes the lands "from the estuary of the Danube or even from Prut to Thessalonica, and the Kostur Lake...", where Bulgarian speech can be heard. The same language is used by Mohammedan Bulgarians who inhabited "the region of Dospat (the Rhodope Mountain), Nevrokop and the Upper Vardar". Writing about them again later, Shafarik stresses





*Festive female costume from Davidkovo*

that they are not an old Muslim population but newly converted Christians who “abandoned their old faith because of long torture but still preserved their mother tongue”.

In 1856 the Frenchman Eugene Poujane publishes in Paris his work “Economic Study of the Orient” where he also supplies statistical data about the number of the Bulgarians of various denominations. In the same work he adds that in the vicinity of Sofia there live Bulgarians “renegades known under the name of Pomaks, who have adopted the Islam as a result of bad treatment”. Telling the story of these Muslims in Bulgaria, Poujane consid-

ers it important to stress that “they speak the Bulgarian language” and practice “many secret Christian ceremonies”, a statement, as we shall see, made in the 19th c. also by many European scholars, diplomats and travelers who passed through Bulgarian territories of the Ottoman Empire.

On April 8, 1859 the Russian Consul in Plovdiv, Naiden Gerov, sends the Russian Consul in Ederne an extensive report about the joint revolt in the Rhodopes of Bulgarian Christians and Mohammedan Bulgarians against the representatives of the Ottoman administration in connection with the heavy taxes. In the report of



Naiden Gerov it is said that the first to rise were the Mohammedan Bulgarians and their example was immediately followed by the Orthodox Bulgarians – their neighbors and compatriots. Ten years later, on November 10, 1864, Naiden Gerov again sends a report from Plovdiv on a similar occasion. This time it is to the Russian Ambassador to Istanbul. In it are described the joint actions against the authorities in the Rhodopes of Mohammedan Bulgarians and Christian Bulgarians. "Presenting their demands – Gerov adds in his following letter related to this revolt in the Rhodopes – the crowd of 2000 Muslims and Christians, armed with clubs, answered all appeals of the commissars to stop the revolt and present their demands in a lawful form with the statement that they had complained so many times, they had appealed for justice and were never heard. They would not leave now until their demands are satisfied". The disturbances in the Rhodopes continued in the same year too and Gerov informed about it in a new letter. He writes that they are now preparing for a bigger action in case their demands are not satisfied promptly and correctly. 10 000 will rise but this time not with clubs but with arms in hand.

In his diplomatic correspondence where the Russian

diplomat Naiden Gerov mentions the Mohammedan Bulgarians he uses the term "Pomaks" always adding that he means the "Mohammedan Bulgarians", or the descriptive term "Bulgarians turned Mohammedan". In his letters to the Russian consuls and to the Russian ambassador he emphasizes the ethnic unity of the population in the Middle Rhodopes despite the religious differences between the two major groups of Bulgarians – Christian and Mohammedan, because they are all Bulgarians: "Christian Bulgarians of the Orthodox faith" and "Mohammedan Bulgarians". In his letter to the Russian Ambassador to Istanbul Prince Alexander Lobanov, dated January 24, 1861, Naiden Gerov applies a statistical annex for the religious affiliation of the population of the Plovdiv sandzak. It informs that there are 20 000 of the male sex, "Pomaks – Bulgarians who adopted the Mohammedan religion".

In the 1860s the interest in the Mohammedan Bulgarians grows. Many articles appear also in Bulgarian periodicals of the period before the Revival. In 1861 the newspaper Bulgaria, published in Istanbul, publishes two articles probably written by the Polish emigrant. They present a completely new theory of the origin of the Pomaks in Bulgaria. One of the articles has the title "History of

*The bridge over Arda river near the village of Srednogortzi, 1920*





the life of the Pomaks". The articles propound the idea of the Polish origin of the Pomaks. According to their author they were brought to the Ottoman Empire as a result of the wars, which Turkey waged, with Poland. The author, a Polish patriot who supports the cause of the Bulgarian Catholic Uniats, bases his hypothesis, relying on no serious arguments, on the speech of this population, which preserves many Old Slavic forms and on the formal similarity in the sounding of "Polyak" and "Pomak".

Apart from the groundless theories of the appearance of the so-called "Pomaks" in Bulgarian lands, these articles whose author is anonymous, offers some very important features observed by the author himself – the Bulgarians who adopted the Mohammedan faith do not observe strictly all rituals of Islam, they keep practicing some of their old traditions and speak the Slavic language of their predecessors. The author avoids calling them Bulgarians directly to avoid contradiction with his thesis about their Polish origin and he stresses on their Slavic characteristics.

Following the data about the Mohammedan Bulgarians of the 1860s, we have to pay special attention to the contribution of the Serbian archeologist and folklorist Stefan Verkovich, a Croatian by birth, who becomes famous in European context with the old songs of Mohammedan Bulgarians of the Rhodope region discov-

ered by him. These songs reproduce myths and legends from the ancient mythology and Thracian antiquity, including also songs about Orpheus.

Verkovich publishes these Rhodope songs in two volumes under the title *Veda Slovena*. Today they are still a document about the language, folklore and world-view of those Rhodope Bulgarians who, during the Ottoman oppression, adopted the Muslim religion.

It must be noted also that the two volumes of *Veda Slovena* are the first public collections of folklore materials of Muslim Slavs (volume I is published in 1874 in Belgrade and volume II in 1881 in Petersburg). They anticipate with two decades similar collections about Muslim Slavs in Bosnia and Herzegovina having in mind that the latter were not under the rule of the Ottoman state and were very close to the Austro-Hungarian Empire whose scholars had already had considerable success in the study of the history, way of life and culture of the southern Slavs.

In describing the Muglen kaaza in another of his books, Topographic-ethnographic essay about Macedonia, published in Petersburg, Verkovich states that on the territory of a village of Mohammedan Bulgarians the peasants found hidden in jars and buried in the fields some Slavic books and church plates. These books and objects were buried in the ground, as the old people of

Bairyam in the village  
of Vaklinovo, 1939







Female costume from the Eastern Rhodopes, beginning of 20th c.

Muglen told him, when their predecessors had to adopt Islam.

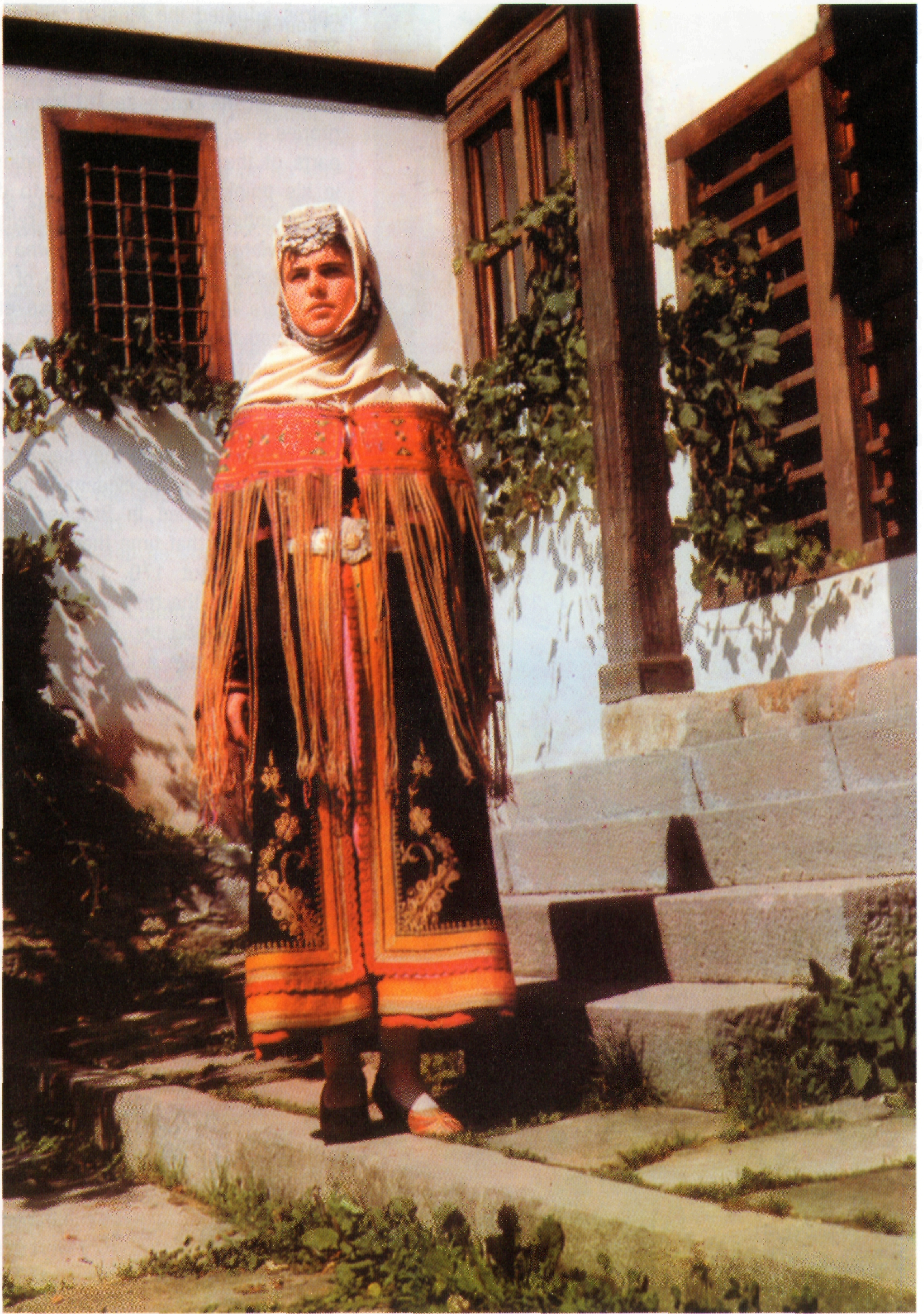
The French engineer and land-surveyor, also author of geographic and ethnographic maps of the Ottoman Empire Lejan also dwells on the topic of the Mohammedan Bulgarians in European Turkey. In his volumes *Ethnography of European Turkey*, *New Linguistic Map of Turkey*, and *Turks, Greeks and Slavs from an Ethnographic Point of View*, published in 1861, he poses still another problem, namely the presence in Eastern Bulgaria of Bulgarians who speak the Turkish language. After telling how part of the population of Albania and

Epirus adopted the Muslim religion to avoid persecution and how the aristocracy of Bosnia and Herzegovina adopted Islam to keep some of their privileges, Lejan dwells on the processes of Islamisation in Bulgarian territories after the Ottoman invasion. As different from other parts of the country, the population in Eastern Bulgaria, in his opinion, was subjected to double pressure – the strong influence of the Islamic religion and the language of the victors. The Bulgarians who adopted, together with the religion, also the language of the Ottoman Turks, he considers lost for the Bulgarian ethnos. But those who preserved their mother tongue, as the case was in different periods and different places within the Ottoman Empire, he includes without any hesitation in the Bulgarian ethnos, no matter whether they adopted the new religion, in which they seemed to be not so diligent. This opinion is most evident in his work *From the Illyrian Triangle*, published in Braunschweig in 1874. In it he states that at that time there were 1 500 000 Bulgarians of whom about 170 000 were Muslims, 4000 were Catholics and the rest were Orthodox.

In 1862–1863 two English women, D. Mackenzie and A. Irby, undertake a long journey in the European parts of Turkey to get acquainted with the way of living and the plight of the oppressed nations. In 1863 they met in Athens the great Bulgarian revolutionary Georgi Sava Rakovsky, who makes a great impression on them and probably contributed to their interest and sympathy for the Bulgarians. They publish their impressions from the places they visited in European Turkey in a book that comes out in London. It is entitled *Turks, Greeks, and Slavs. A journey in the Slavic countries of European Turkey*. Very soon there is a second edition and the book is translated into other European languages. Though Mackenzie and Irby speak of “Slavs” and the “Slavic speech” that sounds in many places among the Muslims in Turkey, one can easily understand from their story that they have in mind Bulgarians. In these stories they insert episodes from Bulgarian history and estimations like the following: “The militant attitude and the bravery of the renegades (they mean the “Slavs” who adopted Islam) clearly suggest national characteristics, typical of the Bulgarians till the time they were disarmed by fraud. Their conversion to Islam was a way to avoid the status of raya”.

The information of the two English women has documentary character because they reproduce not only their personal impressions but also stories heard from the Mohammedan Bulgarians themselves with whom they communicated for a long time. They mention that among their guides there was a Bulgarian Muslim who allowed being told directly that he “he still remained Christian deeply in his soul”. This guide no doubt made their contacts with the Mohammedan Bulgarians very easy. They had numerous discussions with the local people and the book contains one legend told by the Bulgarians – how





*Wedding costume from Smolyan*

their conversion to Islam was executed in the Thessalonica region: "In the region of Thessalonica the Mohammedan Bulgarians tell the following story to justify their act: Oppressed by the Turks, the Bulgarians decided to practice prayer and fasting in order to receive help from Christ. They decided that if after a set term there is no sign of the finger of God, they will submit to Mohammed. The term expired, no help came and they adopted the Mohammedan religion".

The same legend is a pretext for the two English women to share in the book their conviction, built on many observations, that there are deep and sound links between Christian Bulgarians and Mohammedan Bulgarians – they demonstrate the same feelings for the other nations, the same love for the mother tongue and a common national psychology.

Two other English women have also left similar documentary sources – two volumes of written information



about the peoples of European Turkey collected by them for twenty years. The volumes were published in London in 1878 under the title *The people of Turkey: Twenty years among Bulgarians, Greeks, Albanians, Turks and Armenians. By the daughter and the wife of a consul*. The names of the daughter and the wife are not given, neither that of the consul. Most probably they were the daughter and the wife of the British Consul in Istanbul Blunt. These English women also speak with sympathy of the Bulgarian people. With open compassion, they note that this nation of honest and proud people has been for centuries isolated from the civilized world, neglected and broken by the despotic rule of the Ottomans. This has doomed these people to hard labor and deprivation. In the conversion to Islam of some of these people they see the attempt of the better off group to preserve their status in society. "This deplorable plight has lasted for centuries and due to this miserable conditions, they divided into two classes: the poor, who remain true to their religion and their national feeling, and the rich and prosperous, who adopt Islam to avoid the persecution by the

Turks and to preserve their property".

These new Muslims, according to them, followed the newly adopted faith, which they didn't know too well, only in its external norms and behaved as a community different from the rest of the Muslims. "They live separately – the authors of the book about the life of the people in European Turkey add – are considered Muslim because they have mosques but they don't know the Koran and don't follow strictly its rules. Many of them still have their Christian names and speak the Slavic language".

There are a large number of scholars who carry professionally their studies as geographers, geologists, and natural scientists in European Turkey without being interested in the political processes there. But they are not indifferent to the plight of the oppressed peoples. They also discover a considerable difference between the Ottoman Turks and the converted Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks.

The German geographer and archeologist, president of the geographic Society in Berlin, Heinrich Bart, also visited the Bulgarian territories as a scholar. As a result

he published in Berlin his travel notes entitled *A travel in the heart of European Turkey from Ruschuk through Philipopolis, the Rila Monastery, Bitolya and Tessalian Olymp to Thessalonica in the autumn of 1862*. He compiled an original map of this route. Not knowing the language of the local population, Bart judges about their religious affiliation by the presence of a church or a mosque in the village he visited. Although restricted in his contact with the local people, Bart manages to distinguish the Mohammedan Bulgarians from the other Muslims and to document this in his book. Stopping to spend the night in the Bulgarian village of Demirdziler, whose people make their living mainly by extraction and processing of iron, he notes in his diary that these strong people were in their majority Christians but among them there were five to seven families who had "estranged themselves from Christianity".

From the mid 1860s the correspondence of the Russian consuls in European Turkey again contains information about the Mohammedan Bulgarians. In the report of the Russian Consul in Bitolya, Alexander Hitrovo,



Festive female costume  
from the village of Vaklinovo, 1939



sent on May 15, 1864 to the charge d'affaires in Istanbul, Evgeni Petrovich Novikov, there is information about the social status of the local population, their religion and ethnicity. His competence in the Slavic languages allows the Russian diplomat to formulate a competent opinion also on the local speech and on some historical events from the previous centuries. "The local Muslims – he writes in his report – are all Bulgarians, who have once adopted Islam...The Bulgarian dialect of Tikvesh is known in the whole of Macedonia. In Tikvesh and Marihovo the Muslim population is mainly Bulgarian, converted to Islam at the beginning of the invasion. But they still keep their Bulgarian language".

The statistical-economic study of A. Moshin *Danubian Bulgaria*, published in Sanct Petersburg, the male population of the Danubian district is divided into groups on the ethnic principle by data from the first official census of 1865. According to the statistics based on these factors, he gives 140 000 Muslims and 10 000 Pomaks (Mohammedan Bulgarians) for the district. In this first official statistics Mohammedan Bulgarians are given in a separate column, apart from the rest of the Muslims. They are also not included in the column of the Bulgarians since there is no such column in the Ottoman statistics, which distinguishes the population only by religious principle and by ethnicity. Moshin describes relatively precisely the places inhabited by Mohammedan Bulgarians, but only in the Danube district.

Another Russian scholar, Vikentiy Makushev, describes in his ethnographic and historical essays Danubian and Adriatic Slavs a more complete picture of the processes of Islamisation among the Slavic peoples south of the Danube. "In the invasion of the Balkan Peninsula by the Turks – he writes – part of the Bulgarians and the Serbs adopted Islam for mercenary motives... The Pomaks (Mohammedan Bulgarians) kept their ethnicity while their compatriots from Eastern Bulgaria adopted the religion and the language of the victors and became complete Turks". Makushev discusses a fact

established by him – all other groups living among the Bulgarians kept their ethnicity while the reverse was rare. He looks for the explanation of this fact in the Slavic character. One can contradict Makushev with another fact. At his time the number of Mohammedan Bulgarians is twice as small as that of the Islamised Serbs having in mind that the Bulgarians at that time were two or three times as numerous.

The joint work of A. Pipin and V. Spasovich *Review of Slavic Literature of 1865* mentions that the number of Islamised Serbs was 550 000 and that of Mohammedan Bulgarians – 250 000, the total number of Bulgarians in the Ottoman Empire and the neighboring countries being about 7 million. There were similar processes of Islamisation of the Christian population among all nations under Ottoman oppression – Bulgarians, Serbs and Greeks.

The professor of the Moscow theological academy E.



Mohammedan Bulgarians  
in everyday clothes, 1927





Bairyam

punishment. This was the way the Bosnia aristocracy was Islamised and the Christians that remained there, according to Gilferding, were only among the ordinary people. There were many Bogomils in Bulgaria too but during the Ottoman invasion this sect was already in the decline. This is the reason why, he claims, the number of Islamised Bulgarians was considerably lower than that of their Western neighbors since only a small part of the Orthodox Christians were ready to renounce their faith.

Discussing the fact of a smaller number of Bulgarians in comparison with other southern Slavs who had adopted Islam, Gilferding makes the generalizing conclusion about the tenacity of Orthodox faith among Bulgarians: "The cases of conscious adoption of Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as of the Muslim religion, as far as we know, are extremely rare". Liprandi formulates similar conclusions in his work *The Eastern Question and Bulgaria*, published in 1868 in

Golubinsky, studying for a long time the history of Orthodox churches of Bulgaria, Serbia and Romania, arrives at the conclusion that a great part of the Serbian Muslims are descendents of the so-called "Paterini" (Bogomils). The idea that many of the Pavlikyans and the Bogomils in Bulgarian territories have adopted Islam in the period of Ottoman rule finds its serious supporters also in Bulgarian historiography. A serious analysis of this was made in 1868 by Gilferding who studied similar processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina where he establishes a considerable number of Muslim Slavs. He considers the conversion of Bosnian and Herzegovian Slavs to Islam to be a normal process and no traces of conflict between the two religions during the Islamisation process are found in historical monuments. He establishes that the Bogomils in these parts disappeared suddenly and they are replaced by the Muslim religion as the faith of the higher classes and part of the people. He does not dispute the thesis that this was done forcefully and says: "The rulers who belonged to the sect of the Bogomils, and they were the majority, categorically declared themselves Muslim while the Catholics preferred

Moscow. He stresses that everywhere in the mountains of Bulgaria, south of Plovdiv, a region called "Macedonian Bulgaria" (the Rhodopes and the Macedonian mountains) there lived a considerable number of Muslim population "there is no other language than Bulgarian".

Obruchev also describes Mohammedan Bulgarians in the Rhodope Mountain in 1868, when he describes the Plovdiv sandzak in his Military-statistical collection. The Muslim population there, dispersed in the Rhodope Mountain, consisted of mainly Mohammedan Bulgarians "who still keep their Bulgarian language and don't know a word of Turkish". In the same time his compatriot, M. Karlova, who must be the first Russian woman to travel round these places and leave detailed travel notes. She pays great attention to the poor condition of the Mohammedan Bulgarians in Macedonia. Along the Vardar River she describes villages of Bulgarian Christians and Wallachians, which are not so poor. While those of the Muslims, no matter whether Albanians or Uruks from Asia Minor, or "descendents of Bulgarians and Wallachians who adopted Islam" struck one with their misery.





*Maidenly costume from the village of Zhaltusha*

In an article to the newspaper Danube dawn of August 5, 1868 is described an unsuccessful attempt of several Muslim clerics among the Mohammedan Bulgarians to introduce some reforms concerning the freedom of women in public. In Turnovo gathered ten young Mohammedan Bulgarians who had just finished their religious education in Istanbul and brought an appeal with more than a hundred signatures under it. Among the signatures were those of hodzas. They handed the appeal to the Kaimakamin of Turnovo, asking that the Muslim clergy in the town consider it. In the appeal they asked to be allowed to live like the rest of the Bulgarians, more specifically that their women be allowed not to hide and accompany them at weddings

and other events. After a meeting of the local administration with the Muslim clergy a strict decision was taken to put the authors of this appeal in jail for some time and punish them with the very degrading punishment, which consisted in shaving their beards and mustaches.

The appearance of various reformation and heretic movements in the religious life was very common in Bulgarian territories in all periods of Bulgarian history. True to this tradition, and as children of the same land and the same people, the Mohammedan Bulgarians of Northern Bulgaria in this case were trying to reform on an everyday level some of the strict canons of religion and adapt them to their national traditions. Examples of this reformatory spirit appear in the following decades too. After the Liberation of Bulgaria they become still more active. In the 1930s, for example, the Mohammedan Bulgarians from the Rhodope Mountain translated the Koran and started reciting the sacred texts in Bulgarian in the mosques. This was an act in itself close to the triumph in the middle ages of the Slavic and Bulgarian educators, the Sacred brothers Cyril and Methodius, who denounced the trilingual dogma – to read the Holy Bible only in the three languages, Hebrew, Greek and Latin. They introduced into the Christian churches services in Old Bulgarian.

Franz Bradashka published in 1869 in Gotha his book *The Slavs in Turkey*, in which he accuses his French colleague Lejan that in his commentaries he didn't distinguish between the different Muslims and the Ottomans. "Many Bulgarians – Bradashka says in connection with Islamisation processes in North-eastern Bulgaria – have adopted both the Mohammedan religion and the Turkish language. But they have not forgotten their mother tongue and therefore have not become Ottomans". Under "Ottomans" Bradashka has in mind only the Turkish population and not the population of the great Ottoman Empire.

The Frenchman Albert Dumont, who is in correspondence with Verkovich and is like him fascinated by the sensational discovery of the songs of Orpheus preserved in the folklore of the Rhodope Mohammedan Bulgarians, also leaves important information about their culture and



way of life. His first notes about the Mohammedan Bulgarians date from 1868. They appear in the Archeological journal published in Paris and are supplemented years later in the Paris edition of his remarkable study, *The Balkans and the Adriatic*. These publications become known to the Bulgarians immediately due to the Bulgarian Yankulov, at that time a student in Paris. He translated and published a great part of these texts in Bulgarian in 1873 in the journal *Community Center*, published in Braila. The translation is published under the column "The awakening of the Bulgarians". The author Albert Dumont divides the Muslims into two major groups – mountain people, inhabiting the Rhodope Mountain and the other mountains in European Turkey, and those living in the plains. Both groups in Bulgarian territories, according to him, are Christians, who adopted Islam at different times after the Ottoman invasion. Some of them are even ready to return to their old faith: "The truth is that they go to the mosque but in villages of mixed population they share with the Christians the same superstitions, they honor the same ayazma (sacred springs) and believe in the same mosks (amulets). Most of them speak Bulgarian and they would return to Orthodox faith with same ease with which they left it". They didn't understand well "neither the Koran nor the Holy Bible". This last statement of Dumont comes to prove his conviction that

this population has preserved the most ancient legends of the Thracian lands, created long before the appearance of Christianity. This romantic conviction of his, which meets the opposition and criticism of circles that were unwilling to recognize such ancient values of the Slavs, is shared by a number of prominent scholars of that period. Albert Dumont is convinced that the legend of Orpheus is still alive among the Rhodope Mohammedan Bulgarians. And he believes that the truth about that will be victorious in the end and that scholars "who are interested neither in pan-Slavism nor in Hellenism and are looking only for the truth" will not be long in investigating this folklore treasure of the Mohammedan Bulgarians.

Another of his contemporaries, Bianconi, published in 1875 in Paris his *Ethnography and statistics of European Turkey and Greece*, which contains data and a statistical table of the number and composition of the population in those countries for the period 1872–1876. There it is said that among the Muslim population in European Turkey there are "Bulgarians called Pomaks". The number of Mohammedan Bulgarians in European Turkey, given by Bianconi, is considerably lower than that given by other statistics of the same period. In the statistics about the Slavic countries and the Slavic population contained in the Petersburg annex to the *Ethnographic map of the Slavic peoples*, published by the Russian scholar

*Women with children from Trigrad, 1928*





Budilovich in Petersburg in 1875, it is noted that the number of Mohammedan Bulgarians “can be surely increased to 400 000”, that they “inhabit Thrace, the Dospat Mountain (the Rhodopes) and Macedonia”. Budilovich considers also that the number 4 500 000, given in European statistics as a total number of Bulgarians in European Turkey is greatly lowered for to them must be added all Mohammedan Bulgarians, the Hellenized Bulgarians, the Catholic Bulgarians and the Protestant Bulgarians.

The great Austrian friend of the Bulgarians and a student of the peoples of the Balkans, Felix Kanitz, published as early as 1875 an article about the Mohammedan Bulgarians entitled *The Muslim Bulgarian Pomaks in the northern regions of the Balkans*, published in the Papers of the Archeological Society in Vienna. The name “Muslim Bulgarian Pomaks” Kanitz uses only in this article making the note that by it he means “the Bulgarian Slavs who adopted Islam”. In the rest of his works and especially in his three-volume work *Danubian Bulgaria and the Balkan* he calls them “Mohammedan Bulgarians”.

Confirming what many scholars have said before him that the Mohammedan Bulgarians speak the Bulgarian language and preserve many of the Christian traditions of their ancestors, Kanitz mentions still another feature, which distinguishes them from the other Muslims – their negative attitude towards the harems. Not only the poor ones, but also the rich Mohammedan Bulgarians, he notes, rarely have more than one wife. He noticed also that Mohammedan Bulgarians preferred to use the Julian calendar.

The Mohammedan Bulgarians, according to Kanitz, differed in an important way from the Serbian Muslims. While the latter claimed that their Christian brothers by blood were created only to insure leisurely life for the bay and the spahis while the raya there was suffering under the pressure of their fanaticism, the Mohammedan Bulgarians, on the contrary, lived in perfect harmony with their Christian brothers: “All kinds of religious hatred is alien to the Bulgarians converted to Islam. – Kanitz goes on – Nowhere did I hear a complaint of animosity of the ones against the others”.

In the first volume of his book *Danubian*

*Bulgaria* Kanitz returned to his thought that in case of a change in European Turkey, when the numerous Christians there will establish their rule, “these crypto-Christians will return again to the religion of their parents, which now they practice secretly”. In the section on the Catholic movement in Bulgaria Kanitz tells about a case when Mohammedan Bulgarians from Macedonia returned to the faith of their ancestors. In describing the archbishopric in Skopie, which moved to Prizren, Kanitz notes that there were 3000 Mohammedan “crypto-Catholics there, who, fearing their brothers, didn’t dare to practice the Christian teaching. Part of them a few years ago made the brave attempt to return to



*Working female costume from Startzevo*



Christianity for which they were punished: "In 1848 – he writes – 5 Muslim families of Bulgarian origin, about 184 in number, openly declared their conversion to Catholicism and for this act they, together with their priest don Antonio Mariavitz, were sent in exile to Brusa in Asia Minor". After four years of exile they were pardoned as a result of the energetic actions of the European consuls. But only 70 people returned from exile to their places of birth. This was the number of those who survived in the difficult conditions of the exile. Again according to Kanitz, fifteen years later these seventy people, who came back from exile in Asia Minor, again converted to Catholicism, disregarding the risk of new punishment.

Kanitz's German colleague, the scholar Wilhelm von Berg, published in several consecutive issues of the *Globe* journal of folklore in Braunschweig extensive travel notes called *From the Rhodope Mountain through European Turkey*, which contains also rich information about the life of the Rhodope Mohammedan Bulgarians. In it he supports the opinion of many scholars before him about their Bulgarian origin and their devotion to old Bulgarian traditions.

The April Uprising of the Bulgarians in 1876 and the Russian-Turkish War that followed bringing the liberation of Bulgaria cause an intense interest of the European public and press in the plight of the Bulgarians. Writing about them as a nation, which after five years of oppression will soon begin their independent political development, they also mention the Mohammedan Bulgarians as part of this same nation.

The number of publications containing data about the Mohammedan Bulgarians in these dramatic war years is

considerable. We will not enumerate them here and will conclude the concise review of the first mentions of Mohammedan Bulgarians before the reinstatement of the Bulgarian state with a quotation from Ubinini's article published in the *Paris Geographic* journal immediately after the Berlin Peace Treaty: "There are Bulgarian Christians but there are also Mohammedan Bulgarians... Keeping many of the traditions and even the rituals and superstitions of their Christian predecessors, they respect, like the rest of the Bulgarians, St. George, St. Nikola and St. Dimiter... The language they use is one of the purest Bulgarian dialects". Ubinini is specifically impressed by the Mohammedan Bulgarians for, as he himself says, "they were the ones who gave into the hands of the publisher Verkovich the best of their folk poetry". Ubinini tries to explain also the origin of one of their names – "Pomatzi", singular "Pomak". He offers his own so far unknown interpretation. He considers the word "Pomatzi" much older than the time of the Ottoman invasion and denounces as false the banal and naïve explanation by means of the verb pomagam 'help'. He looks for the origin of this name in the root of the Bulgarian word momak 'young man' specifying that "Pomak" must correspond in this case to the Greek polikare 'boy'.

## MIGRATIONS AND EXPULSION OF MOHAMMEDAN BULGARIANS AFTER 1878

The military actions during the Russian-Turkish War of 1877–1878 cause a strong migration wave among the Mohammedan Bulgarians, who head south, as far possible from the fire of war. Great part of Mohammedan Bulgarians in North Bulgaria also join the migration of the Muslim population who retreat in panic to the south of the Balkans because of the advancing Russian troops.

The first migrations of Mohammedan Bulgarians begin from the Lovech region, Pleven and Teteven immediately after the front line approaches their villages.

The panic, the fear of the unknown and the speed of the war actions after the Russian troops cross the Danube, makes them follow the civil Turkish population

who started their migration after the defeated Turkish soldiers and bashibozouk bands. Only a small part remained in North Bulgaria, others settled in South Thrace and in Macedonia where Ottoman rule was preserved by force of the Berlin Peace Treaty. Still others came back after the end of the war but many of their homes and some of the villages in the Lovech and Teteven region remain empty.

During the siege of Pleven, for example, almost all of the Mohammedan Bulgarian population from the Vratza region, with the exception of the people from the village of Tlachene, migrates to Macedonia. Two years later, in 1880, most of the migrants to Macedonia begin coming back to their birthplaces in North Bulgaria but many of



them find the houses in the villages through which the steamroller of the war had passed not suitable to live in. Then many of them head again south but this time towards Eastern Thrace and Asia Minor. The statistics after the census of 1893 shows that some of the villages in the regions of Teteven, Lukovit, Pleven and Byala Slatina, inhabited before the war by Mohammedan Bulgarians, are now completely depopulated. This was the plight of the villages of Borovan, Resseletz, Katunetz, Ugarchin, Todorichene, Cherven bryag, Glozhene, Dragomin dol, Peshterna, Hussen and others. In another group of villages like Toros, Duben, Blusnichevo, Pomashka Lesnitsa,

Dobrevtzi the population decreased by half as a result of the migrations.

The migration of Mohammedan Bulgarians from South Bulgaria towards Turkey at that time is considerably less numerous than that in North Bulgaria. Here it begins in a much later period.

A great part of the Bulgarian territories south of the Balkans were included in Eastern Rumelia, created according to the Berlin Peace Treaty, also called Southern Bulgarian. The border between the newly created Eastern Rumelia and the southern parts of Thrace that remained within the boundaries of Turkey passed along the north-



*Mohammedan Bulgarian costume  
from Smolyan, 1927*



ern ridges of the Rhodope Mountain. This created problems for the traditional occupation of the local population of Christian and Mohammedan Bulgarians connected with free movement between the Aegean Sea coast and the Plovdiv plain. This was still another reason for migration processes.

Some of the Mohammedan Bulgarians in the Rhodopes, whose villages remained according to the Berlin Treaty on Turkish territory, moved north, passed the border and settle in South Bulgaria – the regions of Rupcha, Plovdiv and Topolovgrad. The people of several hamlets from the regions of Smolyan and Ardino, populated with Mohammedan Bulgarians alone, made official steps before the Bulgarian authorities to be allowed to move to Bulgarian territories. Such a common appeal for migration to South Bulgaria was prepared in 1884 by more than 60 families of Mohammedan Bulgarians from the Tumrash villages in the Rhodope Mountain.

After the Unification of North and South Bulgaria that took place in 1885 the border rules along the Rhodope ridge become even stricter. New restrictions were introduced and the customs rules aggravate still further the conditions for practicing the traditional occupation of the people in the Rhodopes. Many of the Bulgarians there, who made their living mainly by raising sheep and working in the Aegean region, lose their free access to these parts with the introduction of the new rules. To pass the border now with their flocks of sheep to go to work along the Aegean shore that they practiced for centuries, they had to pay customs taxes that they couldn't afford. This is the major reason, which makes many of the Mohammedan Bulgarians from Chepino migrate in 1885. Till 1887 100 families only from the villages of Banya started for Turkey. From Ludzene (today a quarter of the town of Velingrad) migrate 50 families. This migration wave covers also the villages of Rakitovo, Kostandovo,



*Maidenly costume  
from the Middle Rhodopes*



Dorkovo, Drenovo, Brezovitza, Dormushevo and others. The migration of Mohammedan Bulgarians from the north slopes of the Rhodope Mountain continued in the years to follow. Many Bulgarian intellectuals and public figures at that time appeal to the Bulgarian government to take measures for improving the living conditions of the population in the Rhodopes in order to restrict the migration of Mohammedan Bulgarians and Christian Bulgarians.

The migration of Mohammedan Bulgarians to Turkey at that time has not yet affected the Middle Rhodopes, which are included in the territory of the Bulgarian state after the Balkan War of 1912.

The Balkan wars of 1912 and 1913, WW I, and the political events of the following decades also cause migration waves, which affect the Mohammedan

Bulgarians. Part of them, together with other Muslims from Bulgaria, mainly ethnic Turks, start south again to be settled permanently in Asia Minor and eastern Thrace, often in the place of the Christian Bulgarian population forcefully expelled from there in 1913. As a result of all these migration waves the number of Mohammedan Bulgarians decreases mostly in North Bulgaria, but in the Rhodope region and its southern parts, which are on the territory of the Greek state, they remain compact. The Mohammedan Bulgarians, who migrated to Turkey, settle in Asia Minor and eastern Thrace. In the places where they form compact groups of the population in separate villages and hamlets, decades later they still use their mother Bulgarian tongue and keep some of their old traditions.

*Mogilitza – Architectural and Ethnographic Complex, built 1820–1840*



*Maidenly costume from the Middle Rhodopes•*



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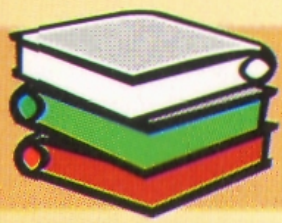
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EDITIONS of **BULGARIAN BESTSELLER**



Stoyan Raichevsky

# The Mohammedan Bulgarians (Pomaks)

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of Bulgarian Books  
and Polygraphy**

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Emanuil Popdimitrov Str. bl.1 entr. B apt.11  
Tel. 962 59 46, 62 21 08  
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